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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policymakers as well as teachers, this digest explores issues affecting high school literature programs. The digest first explores whether a literature curriculum can be based upon the results of limited surveys of high school reading interests. Next, the digest addresses the question of what literature to include in a program, and then examines concerns other professionals have raised about literature instruction. The digest concludes by noting that the debate about what to include in the literature program has evolved into a two-pronged battle: determining the criteria that should be brought to bear on decisions about what to teach, and, once that is decided, determining how literature should be taught. (HOD)

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Issues Affecting High School Literature Programs

Although many of the recent reports on school reform assert the value of learning to read and write, they fail to mention literature as important to achieving quality education. Discussing trends and issues in the profession, the NCTE Commission on Literature (Suhor and Spooner 1985) notes that reform proposals, in addition, call for little emphasis on preparation for teaching literature. This fact, along with an emphasis on teaching reading comprehension rather than on responses to literature, suggests a general belief that literature is relatively inconsequential or that no problems are involved in its teaching. The following is a brief account of issues surrounding the teaching of literature in high schools today.

High School Reading Interests Today—What Are They?

Although it is impossible to generalize from the results of limited surveys of reading interests, they do provide an interesting backdrop. McLeod and Oehler's (1983) study of student preferences among selected traditional and young adult novels reveals that adolescents consistently choose junior or more contemporary novels over traditional novels. Grimme's (1983) survey of the reading interests of 1,650 senior high school students in Nebraska indicates that students show a strong interest in recent popular horror fiction, such as *The Shining*, *Flowers in the Attic*, and *Jaws*, often with film corollaries. But other choices include works usually considered standard: *Animal Farm*, *Lord of the Flies*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Added to this list of standards are those noted by McLeod (1983) as paperback "classics" that annually top the best-seller list—such works as *The Little Prince*, *1984*, *East of Eden*, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *The Great Gatsby*, *A Separate Peace*, *Gone with the Wind*, *Walden*, and *Pride and Prejudice*.

Thomason (1983) surveyed 236 high school sophomores and found that (1) young adults do read for pleasure but find other pastimes more enjoyable; (2) students find reading more appealing if they can choose their own material; (3) high school students do

not enjoy being read to by teachers; (4) required reading does not turn teenagers against reading; and (5) sophomore boys like to read science fiction, adventure, mystery, sports, and short stories, while sophomore girls like to read romances, mystery, and adventure. Among the issues educators should consider is whether a literature curriculum can be based upon such findings.

What Literature Is Currently Being Taught?

Unfortunately, since survey data are lacking, there is no consensus about *what* to include in literature programs. The question of what to teach in the classroom is, in fact, fraught with conflicting images and assumptions, according to Harriet Bernstein (1984). Based on her interviews with curriculum directors, English specialists, media specialists, teachers, authors, publishers, and others, Bernstein concludes that "a coherent national, or even local, vision of literature in schools is not likely to emerge in the near future." Contributing to the problem is the decline of elective English programs, many of which were literature-oriented, and the return of single, large anthologies for classroom instruction. William J. Bennett (cited in Squire 1985), U.S. Secretary of Education, asserting that there is a collapse of consensus about what is worth knowing, suggests the need for a standardized canon of literary study based partly on a national assessment of student knowledge about one hundred selected book titles.

What Concerns Are Professionals Raising?

James R. Squire (1985) feels that while the country is waiting for literature to be redefined, English teachers must consider the ramifications of four basic issues in literary education. One issue is teachers' greater preoccupation with the interaction between book and reader than with response to works that really communicate literary experience. A second issue is that programs in literature must provide young people with selected major literary experiences if there is to be a common culture. Squire observes that "we talk much

about our common heritage and our responsibility for teaching it, but the common heritage is significantly uncommon if children and young people do not share some literary experiences in common." A third issue is that the knowledge and experience readers bring to the reading of a literary work will affect their understanding and appreciation of that work. The fourth issue is that teachers need to "reexamine the vast body of literature, established and contemporary, to identify for young people living in our post-technological age those works of the past and present most likely to elicit rich literary response."

More recently, Darwin Turner (1986) has expressed alarm over (1) an increase in censorship groups, (2) the small number of new books of black literature being published, (3) teachers' and students' lack of critical skills for reading literature, (4) teachers' lack of discrimination in the selection of works—especially literature for adolescents—chosen for concentrated literary study, (5) the rapidly expanding effect that budgetary restraints impose on the teaching of literature, (6) the omission of literature from current definitions of "basics," and (7) the trend toward national testing of competency in literature.

The debate about what to include in the literature curriculum continues. One side argues that books students choose to read and enjoy with little help from teachers are of little value in the literature program of the school, while the other side argues that such books have a vital transitional function in preparing students for more mature literary experiences. Such a debate has involved literature instruction in a two-pronged battle: What criteria should be brought to bear on decisions about what to teach? and, once that is decided, How should literature be taught?

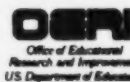
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